**Aboriginal actors appalled by taxi snub at theatre**

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**Dewi Cooke**



Welcome to Melbourne: Aboriginal actors, from left, Natasha Waganeen, Jada Alberts, Frances Djulibing and Djamangi Gaykamangu. *Photo: Jason South*

Their work on an indigenous adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* had been mentally tough and emotionally draining. So on Monday night it was a relief for the group of prominent indigenous actors who make up the cast of *The Shadow King* to mark the end of their first day with a quiet celebration at the Malthouse Theatre.

''It was a really modest function, it's not like everyone rolled out the door, everyone was exhausted,'' Malthouse executive producer Jo Porter said.

Then, about 6.30pm, cast members Rarriwuy Hick, Djamangi Gaykamangu and Frances Djulibing wanted to return to their St Kilda hotel. A cab was called but Hick said when it arrived the driver took one look at the group and drove off. The same thing happened with the second, third and fourth taxis, by which point Hick, a respected actor, dancer and choreographer, was in tears.



Actor Natasha Wanganeen with her 2004 AFI Award. *Photo: Sandy Scheltema*

''They would just pull up, see us and drive off,'' she said. ''We had to get someone to hail a taxi for us who was non-indigenous and we would hide around the corner and by the time she got the taxi we would bolt over, open the door and jump in.''

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This experience was compounded when, on their way to work in the morning, a fellow tram passenger launched an abusive, threatening rant, declaring, ''You Aboriginals don't exist,'' and asking the driver to kick them off, a request the driver ignored.

''I wouldn't think that would happen in Melbourne,'' *Rabbit-Proof Fence* star Natasha Wanganeen said, ''it shouldn't be that way.'' Malthouse company manager Nina Bonacci has made a formal complaint to Silver Top Taxi Melbourne, while David Samuel, chief executive of the Victorian Taxi Association, said the drivers believed to be involved had been identified and would be interviewed.



Playwright and actor Jada Alberts, left. *Photo: Anthony Johnson*

''Until then we don't know what the motivation was, suffice to say there's very few reasons why you can refuse a taxi fare - race is certainly not one of them and neither is distance,'' he said.

*The Shadow King*, which will have its premiere at the Melbourne Festival this year, features a cast of eminent indigenous performers, including Tom E Lewis, star of 1978 film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Wanganeen and playwright and *Redfern Now* actor Jada Alberts. Frances Djulibing appeared in Rolf de Heer's acclaimed *Ten Canoes* while Djamangi Gaykamangu is a member of the popular *Chooky Dancers* troupe.

Federal Arts Minister Tony Burke tweeted that the incident showed ''appalling and unacceptable treatment of some of our finest Aboriginal actors'', but performers say such discrimination is common.



Actor Tom E. Lewis.

Frances Djulibing said she was routinely asked to prove she has enough money to pay for taxi fares in Darwin, while Rachael Maza, artistic director of Ilbijerri Theatre Company, had a similar experience in Sydney trying to get a taxi for actors from Palm Island.

In December, celebrated indigenous musician Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu was refused a fare outside the Palais Theatre.

"It's not just taxis...it's across the board," Maza said. "What this highlights is the long way that we still as a country have to go."

Acting commissioner of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Karen Toohey, said discrimination against indigenous Australians often went unreported and pointed to recent VicHealth research which showed at least 97 per cent of indigenous Victorians surveyed had been the target of some kind of racial abuse or discrimination.

For *The Shadow King* cast, the work goes on. Their current workshop ends on Saturday and when they return next it's likely they will stay somewhere in Southbank – within walking-distance of the theatre.

"I think the most heartbreaking is when you're working, you know?" Hick said. "You're really trying to do the right thing and you're trying so hard to break these barriers that we're trying to live with every day ... and you experience that."

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/theatre/aboriginal-actors-appalled-by-taxi-snub-at-theatre-20130502-2ivzo.html#ixzz2SCSOc2Ov>